

**Responsible management education in UK Business Schools: Critically  
Examining the role of the UN Principles for Responsible Management Education  
(PRME) as a driver for change**

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## **Abstract**

As examinations of the ethics of business practice have increased so too have questions regarding the role of business schools. A key aspect of this re-evaluation has been the emergence of the United Nations Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), reflecting the growing emphasis upon ‘soft regulation’ and voluntary action within new governance frameworks around responsible business practice. This article focuses upon the changing nature of responsible management education within UK business schools and examines the potential role of PRME in shaping these developments. The article examines the findings of two surveys of responsible management education conducted in 2006/07 and 2009/10, and qualitative data derived from case studies of five PRME signatory schools. The article questions whether there is any direct evidence for PRME as a driver of curriculum change. It suggests that its primary impact may lie with its facilitative capacity and the ability of active faculty members in utilising this capacity.

## Introduction

We are witnessing a significant period of reflection regarding exactly what the roles and responsibilities of contemporary management education should be. With a growing list of corporate scandals, malpractice and economic mismanagement leading to a global financial crisis, attention has not only been placed upon the business community itself, but also upon the culpability of business schools in educating many of the senior executives (see for example Brooks, 2009; Global Foundation for Management Education, 2010; James 2009), as this quote from Mitroff (2004) captures:

At best, we are guilty of having provided an environment where the Enrons and the Andersens of the world could take root and flourish. At worst, we are guilty of being active accomplices and co-conspirators in their shoddy and criminal behavior. In either case, unless we finally own up to the under lying reasons for our actions, business schools will only continue to aid and to abet the wave of scandals that have engulfed American businesses within the last few years' (Mitroff, 2004; 185)

Pfeffer and Fong (2004) criticise business schools for structuring management education around a value proposition that emphasizes the career-enhancing, salary-increasing aspects (Pfeffer and Fong 2004; 1501). Similarly Ghoshal (2005) argues that the desire for business and management schools to be perceived as 'scientific' has resulted in the over-reliance on a narrow core theoretical agenda which has marginalized ethics and morality. He suggests that, '... we have taught our students that managers cannot be trusted to do their jobs – which is of course to maximize shareholder value – and that to overcome 'agency' problems managers' interests must

be aligned with those of the shareholders ... we have preached tight monitoring and control of people to prevent ‘opportunistic behaviour’ (Ghoshal 2005; 75).

At the forefront of this re-evaluation of management education is an increased concern with notions of morality, social responsibility, business ethics and sustainability; reflecting societal concern with excessive materialism, lack of business accountability, and the role of business in environmental deterioration and human rights abuses (Blowfield and Murray, 2011; Burchell 2008). For decades, it is argued, business schools have taught a prevailing ‘Milton Friedman view of the world’ (Mitroff, 1983: 19), resulting in business managers prioritising economic considerations over social and environmental ones (see also Ghoshal 2005; Henisz 2011). In contrast, management schools should be developing what Hawawini (2005) describes as ‘societal skills’ reflecting the need for new paradigms of business thought and consideration of global issues and concerns (Hawawini, 2005:774).

Confronting these challenges the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC) launched the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) aimed at business and management schools. PRME utilised the core principles and values underlying the UNGC to encourage reform of management education. Reflecting an increasingly dominant emphasis upon instigating change through ‘soft governance’ and voluntary self-regulation (see, for example, Brandsen, Boogers and Tops 2006; Fransen and Kolk, 2007) PRME encourages business schools to sign up to a commitment to six key

principles and to a process of continual development in this regard; reporting on their progress in developing these principles within their organisations.

This paper focuses upon providing an initial evaluation of the impact of the PRME initiative upon management education within UK business schools. It examines some of the challenges, barriers and potential of utilising soft-regulation tools such as PRME as a mechanism for instigating change. It draws upon two sets of empirical data to examine these processes. First it discusses the results of two surveys into responsible management education and curricula change conducted in 2006/07 and 2009/10. This material is utilised to provide an overview of the breadth of responsible management education in UK business school curricula and the patterns of change that are emerging. In particular, it compares the broad patterns of curricula change within PRME signatory and non-signatory schools. Second, the article discusses the findings of more qualitative research material from an examination of five PRME signatory schools, identifying areas and processes through which PRME signatory status has been influential in instigating and shaping change.

By analysing these two sets of data, the article highlights that statistically there is little evidence that being a signatory to PRME has resulted in significant progress in developing a responsible management curricula in comparison to non-participating schools. It suggests that, in common with the UNGC, the soft-governance approach adopted by PRME does not, in itself, produce the type of change and development for which it was intended. Taking the analysis a stage further however, the article shows

that more detailed examination of five signatory schools highlights how PRME signatory status can act as a means through which active faculty can exercise agency to shape organisational change. While there is no strong empirical evidence of PRME being the primary driving force for change, examining its role from the perspective of a process of soft governance/regulation highlights the more informal channels that PRME opens up for reform.

The article will firstly provide a brief summary of existing research on responsible management education in the UK. It will then present a theoretical overview of the increasing role of soft governance frameworks in both responsible management and higher education fields and the potential value of examining the agency of individuals to create organisational change. It will outline the framework of the current study and examine key findings from both the quantitative survey data and the qualitative material pertaining to the five signatory school case studies. Developing from this, the article will highlight key areas in which the connection between the soft regulation framework of UN PRME and the ability of key actors to exercise agency through this framework, offers the potential for changes to responsible management education processes. By adapting this approach, it is argued, one can gain a more nuanced understanding of both the limitations and also the potential of PRME.

### **Examining the Development of Responsible Management Education in the UK**

Research on responsible management provision has been conducted at different stages over the past 20 years using various analytical frameworks. While not always directly comparable, it provides an interesting overview of the level of commitment and direction of activity within the field. Overall, the overriding theme emanating from these studies concerns a lack of significant commitment to the ethics agenda.

Cowton and Cummins' (2003) survey found that business ethics was a core subject in only 18 out of 105 schools. Their study suggested that, '...The chance of finding business ethics as a core element of an undergraduate or a postgraduate programme is roughly similar – and not particularly high' (p. 41). Similarly, Macfarlane and Ottewill's (2004) examination of subject review reports noted that 'the numbers [of schools] deeming ethical issues of sufficient importance to be highlighted in their aims and objectives was depressingly small' (p.341). Both studies noted the small number of staff teaching in the field and their relative lack of influence within schools. Mahoney's (1990) comparative study suggested that ethics teaching in the UK fell significantly behind that in the US and that, where it did occur, it was due to the drive of specific individuals rather than broader institutional commitments.

Cornelius, et al., (2007) add a further dimension, distinguishing between 'reactive' and 'proactive' categories of ethics teaching. They argue that, '.. for organisations to embrace ethically and socially responsible thinking, the provision needs to be 'proactive', with fundamental ethics programmes taught by committed and engaged business schools' (p.118). However, their analysis suggests that the majority of ethics

teaching falls within the 'reactive' format, largely due to the lack of suitably qualified and experienced staff. The key role of expert staff in this field was further highlighted in Matten and Moon's (2004) study of CSR teaching in European business schools. They noted that 'the key actors are not the leaders of the schools or universities but individual faculty members with a research interest or otherwise in CSR' (p.330). They argued that the UK represented the 'leading country in provision of teaching and research of CSR in Europe' (p.335). While the studies above point to a growing awareness and engagement with the responsible management/business ethics agenda within UK business schools over the past two decades, little has been done to provide a clear picture of the extent and scope of this provision.

### **The barriers and potential of PRME as a soft regulation mechanism for change**

The development of PRME marks a significant international step towards a broad re-evaluation of the activities of business schools (see also, Forray and Leigh, 2012). The original Concept Paper (Escudero, 2006) highlighted the need for business schools to equip business leaders of the future with an enhanced set of skills. First, useful management tools and integrative ways of embedding environmental, social and governance (ESG) concerns and new multistakeholder procedures into the daily management of the company. Second, best practices case stories – both in terms of the internalization of values by companies and in terms of collective actions by responsible business in the community. Third, new reporting procedures and fourth, recruitment of



professionals prepared to deal with the new challenging environment of business’ (Escudero, 2006: 3).

Central to the initiative is a commitment from signatory business schools to engage with six key principles, concerning teaching, research, engagement with the community, collaboration with business etc. (For a detailed outline of the six principles see <http://www.unprme.org/about-prme/the-six-principles.php>). The PRME initiative was launched before the global financial crisis and, whilst the initial uptake was slow, there has been a marked acceleration in the number of schools (especially in the UK), signing up over the last five years. In May 2008, only nine UK institutions had signed, whereas by March 2012, 40 institutions had pledged support, representing not only a significant minority of business schools, but including nine of the Financial Times top 20 UK business schools. Internationally, by March 2014 540 organisations were participating in the initiative. Of equal significance in PRME’s growing credibility has been the participation of the accrediting bodies - The Association of MBAs (AMBA), The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD) and The Association of Business Schools (ABS) - on the PRME Steering Committee.

The PRME initiative follows the pattern of the UNGC in framing a process of voluntary self-regulation and engagement for its signatory organisations. The emphasis upon voluntary soft-governance frameworks has been a common pattern within broader activities surrounding corporate social responsibility (CSR) and the commitments to

more sustainable and responsible business practices. Soft law processes predominate with a plethora of codes of conduct, multi-stakeholder agreements, reporting initiatives and benchmarking criteria allowing companies to select how they frame their CSR engagement. Proponents of these frameworks claim that they allow organisations to tailor their engagement to their individual context and consequently they encourage organisations to go beyond simple compliance.

Soft governance mechanisms have also been identified as a significant feature of broader processes within higher education reform. Research identifies the increased role, status and significance of a raft of self-regulatory practices at the heart of contemporary higher education practice, including the increasingly important role of accreditation bodies, league tables, student surveys and benchmarking activities, among others (See Larner and Le Heron, 2005; Hedmo and Wedlin, 2008; Teichler, 2008; Lowrie and Willmott, 2009). Overall, therefore, the soft-governance, self-regulatory, voluntary nature of the PRME initiative fits closely to the context of both the nature of the processes within responsible management reform agendas and those of higher education reform, monitoring and evaluation.

The increasing utilisation of soft governance mechanisms is not without its critics however. Within the CSR field, while proponents emphasise the value of loose, self-regulatory frameworks in pushing forward changes to responsible management practices, critics argue that the emphasis upon voluntarism has created a process dominated by business case led searches for 'win-win' scenarios, resulting in the co-

optation and institutionalisation of challenges to contemporary business activity. Soft regulation, it is argued, merely allows companies to develop CSR discourse and action within a framework that supports the business status quo rather than encouraging radical change. CSR therefore, is actually restricting the potential for responsible business activity since these frameworks allow organisations to sign up to initiatives, without necessarily committing them to tangible change.

### **Soft Regulation and the role of internal actors**

The perspectives outlined above reflect some of the primary debates within the broader responsible management/CSR field, and are not just applicable to the experiences of PRME and the UNGC. While proponents identify CSR as a key strategic management tool for promoting responsible business activity, critical management scholars view developments in the CSR field as a manipulative process of institutionalisation and control, allowing organisations to maintain a ‘business as usual’ stance behind the rhetoric of voluntaristic social responsibility.

While there is not scope within this article to engage thoroughly with these differing perspectives, we take our theoretical lead from a developing body of literature which, while recognising the obvious weaknesses of CSR in its ‘strategic management’ guise, argues that both the language of responsible business and the soft governance frameworks accompanying it cannot be simply dismissed as a process of co-optation and control. Burchell and Cook’s (2013) theoretical exploration of the process of

stakeholder dialogue highlights how the spaces created by CSR have been utilised by different actors to push for changes beyond a simple ‘business case’ interpretation. By doing so, this work opens alternative theoretical perspectives on the change process that go beyond a simple CSR equals co-optation stance.

Linking CSR activity to a range of theoretical perspectives from different disciplinary backgrounds including Mouffe’s (1999) conceptualisation of ‘agonistic pluralism’, Meyerson and Scully’s (1995) work on ‘Tempered Radicals’ and Kellogg’s (2009) work on ‘relational spaces and institutional change’, Burchell and Cook’s (2013) focus upon the ability of actors to utilise CSR initiatives to exercise agency in shaping organisational change. Applying this approach within the context of soft governance schemes such as PRME leads us to an awareness that our analysis needs to ensure that the structural dimensions of such initiatives do not become overly predominant.

This research therefore considers the impact of PRME not just from a top-down, strategic perspective regarding the direct influence of the Principles on curriculum change, but also from a more agency-centred perspective which considers the ways in which actors have utilised these soft mechanisms as channels for change. In doing so, it reflects Solitander et. al.’s (2012) call to move away from the more pedagogical focus within analysis of responsible management education, centred upon course content and curriculum development, and towards the role of actors actively pushing for change. By focusing upon this dimension, we argue, our analysis of PRME goes beyond structural critiques of the weaknesses of soft regulatory schemes, and provides a

stronger, more nuanced understanding of the ways in which the vagaries of soft regulation may allow individuals a level of agency to define and utilise these initiatives to spark organisational change. Kirton and Trebilock (2004) identify this as a key aspect of soft governance, in that the regulations and norms are open to interpretation and adjustment by those being regulated. Similarly, Sahlin and Wedlin (2008) note that the domain and applicability of soft rules and conditions for compliance are being defined together with the rules themselves (p.232). This has both positive and negative connotations for how responsible management progresses.

### **Analysing Responsible Management Education in the UK**

The research findings in this article examine responsible management education at UK business schools, framed within the context of the theoretical/analytical discussion outlined above. First, it examines the nature of responsible management education provision emerging across the UK. Given the significant increase in schools signing up to UN PRME, the first aim was to consider whether this increase has been matched by increased curriculum development and whether the data offers any evidence to demonstrate that PRME has had a significant influence in shaping change. Data from two surveys of responsible management education provision conducted in 2006/07 and 2009/10 is utilised; examining the nature, context and style of teaching provision pertaining to sustainability, ethics, CSR and responsible management. As the PRME initiative was instigated in July 2007, after the first survey was conducted, we utilised the first survey as a benchmark for the level of responsible management education

provision of the PRME signatories prior to their commitment to the initiative. It also allows us to develop comparisons between PRME signatories and their non-signatory counterparts.

In undertaking this process two key methodological issues arise, as highlighted by Matten and Moon's (2004) analysis, discussed earlier. Firstly, which institutions and business schools should be included within the study? Secondly, which programmes or courses should be incorporated? The study utilised the *British Accounting Review Research Register* 2006 and 2008 (12th and 13 Editions) for selection purposes. The registers included 105 and 108 institutions, whose academic staff, as members of the British Accounting Association, list their research and teaching activities and have been included in the survey (participants in this survey allowed us to identify departments, faculties and schools within each business school). In consideration of the second issue, the study included all programmes and modules identified under the terms 'corporate (social) responsibility', 'environment and management', 'business ethics' and 'sustainability'. The study was also inclusive of modules where a significant portion of taught content fell within the responsible management field and also noted where a conscious programme of mainstreaming Corporate Responsibility/ Sustainability issues into an institutions modules and programmes had occurred.

The surveys sought to obtain information on the availability of responsible management education - both programmes (multiple modules leading to a degree) and individual modules (semester length courses) - the label under which the course is taught and its

integration into the core curriculum (i.e. as an optional or compulsory course). Both surveys followed the same data collection procedure. The first phase involved examining institutional websites for evidence of responsible management education programmes and individual modules and clarifying ambiguities by telephone. Where no modules were found or where there was insufficient access to the programmes of study, the institution was contacted for verification.

The second aspect of the study examined the more qualitative considerations regarding the role of actors pushing for change within management schools. For this aspect we focused in more depth upon recent developments within five case study schools within the UK. The five schools were selected to offer a range of geographical locations, ages and sizes. All five are signatories to PRME and have highlighted a commitment to responsible management education. Between three and five members of staff were interviewed within each department, incorporating a range of hierarchical positions from Faculty Deans and Heads of Schools, to programme directors, lecturers and module leaders. This permitted the study to obtain a scope of perspectives from individuals playing different roles within the change programme.

Interviews allowed for the exploration of issues highlighted in the survey data, but more importantly provided an opportunity for participants to discuss the details behind their engagement with PRME and their perception of its impact upon their organisation's strategies (Mason, 2002). The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, they were then analysed using framework analysis and thematic coding techniques (Ritchie

and Spencer, 2003; Mason, 2002). A thematic framework was developed based upon an open and systematic analysis of the raw data into core themes of comparable analysis, ensuring that emerging issues were accurately reflected and accommodated within the analytical framework.

While we acknowledge that there are clear limitations in the depth of data provided within these case studies - due to the small number of staff interviewed in comparison to the number of staff employed in each school - focusing upon staff actively involved with PRME implementation enabled the analysis to highlight common issues and themes which all five case studies have had to confront as a consequence of engaging with PRME. The actual impact, consequences and strategic shift within these schools inevitably will vary, but the purpose of this discussion is to try and contextualise the key issues and themes emerging from PRME engagement which have shaped approaches to change. Inevitably some level of extraction and generalisation will be made as a consequence. The discussion below will focus firstly upon analysis of the quantitative survey data before moving on to the qualitative case studies.

### **The provision of dedicated responsible management programmes.**

Across the two surveys (2006/7 n=105, and 1009/10 n=108) there was little change in the number of programmes offered, (11 and 13) but there had been a noticeable turnover of programmes with lack of student numbers mainly cited as the reason for abolishing programmes. Currently such programmes are still seen as relatively niche and sensitive to demand. The survey results also highlight a slight increase in postgraduate



programme provision. To the knowledge of the authors there have been four new programmes launched in the last academic year. Given the amount of time and administrative procedure involved in accrediting and planning new programmes, it is possible that the three year period in between surveys has not been enough time to fully capture what may be an expansion of postgraduate provision, linked to the emergence of PRME and the pressure on business schools for change.

### **Examining the provision of responsible management modules.**

Table 1 displays the proportion of institutions offering responsible management modules at undergraduate and postgraduate levels and their status as either optional or compulsory modules.

INSERT TABLE ONE HERE

The results show that in 2009/10, 87 per cent of institutions surveyed offered some form of optional or compulsory responsible management modules at either postgraduate or undergraduate level. This represents an increase of 4 per cent from the first survey, and leaves only 14 of the 108 institutions assessed to have no provision at all in this area. The study also highlights a 15 per cent decrease in the proportion of institutions offering only optional responsible management modules at any level (see shaded areas) and a 20 per cent increase in the proportion of institutions now offering compulsory responsible management modules at any level.

Although the results imply progress, closer analysis reveals that there is still a significant way to go before suggesting that responsible management provision is a standard part of UK business school curricula. The figures above focused upon provision at *either* postgraduate or undergraduate level. Broken down into constituent categories the statistics are less encouraging, with 24 per cent of programmes offered at undergraduate level and 31 per cent at postgraduate level not providing any stand-alone responsible management modules. Furthermore only approximately one in three programmes at either level of study deliver responsible management modules as compulsory aspects. The results indicate that at two thirds of the institutions surveyed a student may undertake a full programme, at either undergraduate or postgraduate level, and not receive any detailed, specialist responsible management teaching.

Clearly these findings cannot be directly interpreted to imply that students wouldn't cover any relevant topics, as such issues may arguably be covered within more mainstream modules. However, information provided by these institutions gave no evidence to suggest that responsible management issues had been 'mainstreamed' into established teaching patterns. Even where this may have been the case, students are not necessarily getting detailed coverage of these themes from specialists in the field in a manner similar to that provided for other core management subject areas.

**Examining the PRME signatory institutions within the context of the overall provision in the UK .**

Examining the results of the PRME signatories included in the study, there appears little difference from their non-signatory counterparts. Table two shows the proportion of PRME signatories currently providing responsible management modules to be in-line with that of the non-signatory institutions.

INSERT TABLE TWO HERE

Two key issues stand out from these results. Firstly, the 2006/7 study shows that a much greater number of the PRME signatories (70 per cent) were already providing responsible management modules at postgraduate level than the non-signatory counterparts (42 per cent). This suggests that prior to the PRME initiative being launched these schools were already more engaged with the responsible management agenda. Secondly, the results also indicate that non-signatories of PRME have been capable of curriculum development without committing to the initiative. Non-signatories are catching-up at the postgraduate level and have comparable results at undergraduate level. This finding, coupled with the deficit of identifiable substantial curriculum change among PRME signatories, raises questions regarding whether PRME has functioned as a driving force for curriculum development. Further, it also suggests that a level of internal development activity often precedes the point at which an institution seeks PRME signatory status.

In this context PRME affiliation may not actually be driving the process of change but rather reflecting a pre-existing internal engagement with the responsible management agenda within schools. As will be highlighted, it appears that PRME membership has been utilised by signatories as a communication tool and justification for activities that have already been evolving, rather than being the spark for such developments.

### **Reflections on the survey data**

The survey findings suggest a continued progression within UK business schools towards greater engagement with the responsible management agenda. While this progression is far from uniform in shape and application, or with regard to the language and framing of ‘responsible management’, it is clear that more students are being confronted with issues of responsibility, sustainability and business ethics as part of their business school education.

The survey findings do not however, provide evidence that PRME represents the catalyst for these activities. Rather, PRME appears to be one of a range of soft governance incentives which have encouraged an expansion of ongoing activities in this field. For example, one might equally point to the actions of accreditation bodies as a more significant factor. The initiatives undertaken by these bodies may also have prompted schools to rethink their curricula. For example, the main European accrediting body, EQUIS (EFMD Quality Improvement System), requires schools as one aspect of curriculum development to ‘Summarise the extent to which programmes

integrate the main challenges in business and society such as Global Responsibility and Sustainable Development'. (EQUIS,2011)

It is possible that some schools, with an eye on accreditation, have undertaken changes which have made them *subsequently* consider PRME, as an effective way of evidencing engagement for accreditation purposes. Commitment to PRME thus becomes a means to an end rather than an end in itself. On the assumption that accreditation is a more strategic goal than PRME membership, additional signatories could be added in future, as schools recognise the public relations angle to be exploited by relating their story of progress on their own, and the PRME, website. The fact that the accreditation bodies are also PRME signatories in many cases, may also act as an indication that responsible management issues will become more central to accreditation criteria, encouraging more reluctant schools to participate, whether or not they have any true desire to engage with the responsible management agenda.

The findings of the survey also raise important questions regarding the effectiveness of this form of soft governance as a driver for change within business schools. As with the GC, conditions for becoming a PRME signatory are not stringent, requiring merely a stated commitment to the six principles and to report on progress in applying them every eighteen months. With no framework for assessing application of the principles, no conception of what constitutes expected 'progress' towards them between reports, and no significant method for evaluating the accuracy of the reports submitted by schools, PRME actually offers very little in terms of committing organisations to

change. Rather, it allows schools the opportunity to sign up to a commitment to responsible management which they define and regulate for themselves with little or no pressure for substantive change.

The survey data provides little substantive evidence that PRME, as a process of soft governance, has acted as a catalyst for change within signatory institutions. However, given the nature of PRME, it is fair to suggest that the survey data can arguably only present a partial picture in relation to its potential impact - effectively highlighting the outcome of change in terms of new programmes and modules rather than the processes that instigated these changes and the internal engagement with the responsible management agenda. For this reason, the study examined more closely the impact of PRME membership upon five signatory institutions and its role in their interaction with responsible management issues.

### **Developing Responsible Management within five PRME signatory schools**

Within all of the five PRME signatory schools there has been an identifiable transition towards improved provision of responsible management education since each made their respective commitment to the initiative. This has included new responsible management programmes, stand-alone modules and increased attempts to ‘mainstream’ responsible management themes within existing programmes. Table 3 below summarises the main changes identifiable within each of the schools.

INSERT TABLE THREE HERE

All of the schools reflect a process of gradual change, with incremental developments at different levels. What was particularly noticeable was that the nature, style and focal points of change varied across institutions. This would appear to mirror the expectations within PRME that schools develop their own systems for engaging with the six principles and that they undertake and demonstrate a process of continual improvement and progress.

Closer examination of provision within the five case studies also offers insight into why the development of new programmes has been relatively limited. Some schools are seeking to develop individual, flagship postgraduate programmes catering for ‘niches’ of students wanting to enter industry in the field of sustainability/CSR. The role of these modules is seen as quite symbolic and expectations regarding student numbers etc. limited. Study participants were largely uncertain regarding the recruitment potential of these programs and the level of student demand.

Given that recruitment is a key driving force in the development of new programmes, it is interesting to note that some schools are prepared to allow a longer development period for these programmes than is normally the case. Participants spoke of how a year-long recruitment process in their inaugural provision and a particular patience with regard to admissions in subsequent years - as reputation is built - was vital in enabling these programmes to develop successfully. For at least three schools, participants noted

that their schools had applied less pressure regarding recruitment and that PRME membership had been a factor in this. One participant noted:

‘ ... it is a matter of being patient and flexible... so they will not just want to see large numbers next year, the first year the programme’s run’ (School 4 interview 1)

The question of student demand was identified as a significant barrier to changes at undergraduate level, where participants noted that students were hesitant in choosing to specialise in responsible management within their programmes. While responsible management and CSR are popular optional modules within standard degree programmes, its success as a broader ‘badged’ specialisation remains uncertain, as it is not perceived as offering a direct employment route in comparison to other aspects of business education. At the same time, many of those engaged in championing responsible management issues at the five case study schools, were more concerned with engraining these topics within established, mainstream programmes rather than creating specialist programmes.

Discussions around the extent and type of provision required within the responsible management realm raised important questions regarding the potential proactive nature of business schools in this field. While participants were conscious of the ‘demand-led’ nature of programme provision, there was also a feeling that schools had a duty to lead and that responsible management issues represented a field in which business schools should set the agenda rather than just responding to student demand.



‘part of our role as a university and as academics is to shape that market ... there is the notion that in 30-40 years in fact the management of activities will fundamentally change for all sorts of reasons to do with responsibility (Business school 4 interview 2) This desire to set the agenda as well as responding to demand, was recognised as a key reason for schools signing up to PRME and for the extra leniency being given to new programmes. Some schools also saw the responsible management agenda as key in shaping a clear identity for their core undergraduate programs and a way to distinguish themselves from competitors.

### **Evaluating the role of PRME within the process of change**

In line with the survey findings outlined above, discussions with members of staff from the five schools highlighted that they did not identify PRME as the primary driver of change within their schools. Rather, participants noted that the responsible management themes were already active within their planning and PRME reflected what they were already doing. Each of the case study schools identified the core aspects of the PRME principles as being a reflection of existing values or direction; whether this be a connection to religious foundations, a commitment to the production of critical research and graduates, or a growing awareness of the centrality of sustainable development issues as the quotes below demonstrate.

Given the values of this university as a Christian foundation, we felt that PRME spoke to that very well (Business school 5, interview 3)

UN PRME was actually fitting with the values the school was putting at the forefront (Business school 4, interview 1)

I think our practice pre-dates it [PRME] by a long way (Business school 2, interview 2)

PRME was identified as a reflection of a broader transition within management education of which the principles were one aspect. Some participants felt that they should not simply be driven by the demands of PRME, but that it should be built into the broader set of underlying values. While PRME was not the key driver for change, participants identified important value in becoming signatories to the process. In all cases, having PRME signatory status appeared to open up avenues for development which may have proved more difficult without this added incentive. In particular four key themes became apparent throughout the interviews.

### **PRME as a channel for debate and discussion**

Participants noted that PRME signatory status opened up the opportunity for debate within schools about exactly what responsible management education entailed and how it should be approached. It was notable that in all cases the decision to commit to PRME had been instigated by specific groups of staff and was subsequently introduced to the broader school, rather than being decided upon by the school as a whole. As such, becoming a signatory to PRME encouraged discussion on a broader level than would have been possible without this type of commitment.

## **PRME as a framework for assessing progress**

Participants noted that the requirements of being a PRME signatory encouraged a process of reflection within schools as well as providing a set of criteria within which to frame ongoing activities. Commitment to PRME and the subsequent requirement of signatories to compile a 'Sharing Information on Progress' (SIP) 18 month report was identified by the schools as a useful tool for encouraging a thorough review of teaching provision and curricula issues in relation to responsible management.

What PRME did, and putting the report together did, was to make me identify and surface what was going on (Business school 2, interview 1)

Having to produce the SIP allowed us to persuade the management team to fund an audit of responsible management activity within the school. The process has been invaluable for identifying what we already do and where we have important gaps ... Without the commitment to PRME as an instigator I very much doubt we could have persuaded the management team to do this. (Business school 3, interview 1)

## **Utilising PRME to promote change**

Within all five schools it was clear that members of staff had developed innovative ways to utilise PRME to encourage changes that they may not otherwise have been able to achieve. Staff found ways to utilise PRME to promote responsible management internally and to encourage curriculum change. Discussions with participants identified

a number of subtle applications where PRME has been used to add justification and legitimacy to new initiatives.

When we put in the paperwork for a new MBA with sustainability, one of the supporting documents for that... is that we've signed up to PRME (Business school 2, interview 1).

We were undertaking a review of our first year provision anyway and I wanted to add a far greater emphasis on sustainability, ethics and responsibility. It certainly made my case far easier when I could add the fact that this would tick a big box on our PRME commitments. (Business school 3, interview 1).

While there is no concrete evidence to suggest that many of the changes highlighted within these schools would not have been developed without the commitment to PRME, undoubtedly members of staff have utilised PRME to gain greater legitimacy and leverage in creating convincing arguments for curriculum change.

### **PRME as an external communications tool**

As a final dimension, all five schools identified signing up to PRME as a good external communicator. Again PRME was not seen as the spark for these approaches but was identified as a valuable way of signifying a commitment to the responsible management agenda through a common identifier. Having PRME on departmental websites was a common pattern amongst all of the schools and participants spoke of using their

signatory status as an effective way to engage with potential external partners, future students, accrediting bodies and potential new members of staff.

### **The status of PRME and the role of committed actors within Schools**

The data from the five case studies highlights the differing extent to which becoming PRME signatories represented a broad strategic commitment from across the school, or the active commitment of a small group of staff. The role of senior management in shaping the commitment to PRME appeared to vary across schools. Differences in approach seemed to influence how the commitment was perceived within the school, with some identifying it as a key signifier of school strategic direction while others felt that their school had signed up primarily because they had demonstrated that it would not cost much and that the requirements were not particularly onerous. As one participant noted:

I think we probably signed up to PRME not because our senior management team actually have a big commitment to the agenda, but more because a couple of us kept shouting about it and they thought it would be a good way to shut us up for a while! (Business school 3, interview 1)

The research highlighted the important connection that was required between research active staff in this area and senior management in order to take the PRME commitment beyond a superficial level. Active support from senior management was seen as a key to expanding commitment beyond research active staff in this field. However, change

could not be imposed by senior management without active interest and expertise from within the faculty. As one interviewee noted:

The top level can stimulate and get discussion going and again circulate best practice, do all sorts of things like that but it would be a supportive role rather than a directive role (Business school 2, interview 2)

### **Utilising connections with accreditation**

The case study data substantiated the importance of the connection between PRME and accreditation. Many interviewees attributed a key role in the future development of PRME to the significance of accreditation bodies such as AMBA, AACSB and EQUIS. Interviewees utilised this as evidence of the growing importance of responsible management to business school curricula, and a justification for why their school needed to take these issues seriously.

At the same time however, there was scepticism regarding exactly how much impact the commitment to PRME would have upon the priorities of these bodies. A number of participants questioned exactly how the issues and themes at the heart of PRME would be accommodated within the priority concerns of accreditation.

It's useful that you can refer to the views of accrediting bodies. However, they need to acknowledge that if we do this we can't do other things, and I'm not sure we've got that far down the line yet (Business school 4, interview 3).

## **UN PRME, soft regulation and responsible management education: Highlighting agendas for future research**

The study outlined above raises some interesting questions regarding the role and impact of PRME as an effective process of soft regulation for shaping the development of responsible management within UK business schools. In particular it highlights two main areas in which, we argue, further research is required if we are to develop a more effective understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of PRME as a model of voluntary curricula and organisational change. First, we consider the ability of such forms of soft regulation to achieve significant levels of change. Second, we highlight the role and agency of individual faculty members to utilise frameworks such as PRME to leverage broader organisational change.

This article highlights that there is little to suggest that PRME's self-regulatory, voluntary nature and the subsequent commitment of signatories to six broad principles has in itself created a key driver for change within business schools. This finding mirrors the critiques of the GC as an effective process of soft regulation on companies. Whitehouse (2003) for example, notes that the GC and other similar intergovernmental voluntary initiatives face the same core dilemma in that, '...since adherence is voluntary it is not universal and those whose activities are most in need of regulation are least likely to subscribe to them' (Whitehouse, 2003; 311).

At the heart of many of these critiques lies the argument that significant change cannot be created merely by encouraging organisations to voluntarily sign up to a vague set of principles and then produce unsubstantiated reports outlining their progress towards meeting them (See Garsten and Jacobsson, 2007; Whitehouse, 2003; Hughes and Wilkinson, 2001; Cohen 2001). Research by Arevelo and Fallon (2008), for example, highlights the weaknesses of voluntary reporting within the UNGC and the lack of an effective mechanism for measuring satisfactory or unsatisfactory progress and subsequent penalties for inaction. Whitehouse (2003) similarly notes that the framework of the UNGC means that rather than being committed to addressing all of the principles consistently, companies can pick and choose the areas that they engage with. The potential for PRME to fall prey to similar criticisms is undoubtedly high. Further research is needed to examine whether or not PRME encourages significant reform of responsible management education, or as Utting's (2002) critique of the UNGC argues, whether it does more to enhance the image of the signatory organisations than to actually improve social and environmental standards. With one eye on accreditation criteria there is arguably strong pressure to focus upon the former at the expense of the latter.

If such critiques of the GC appear to direct future research on PRME towards similar concerns over impact, the second research theme which this article seeks to encourage reflects Windsor's (2001) claim that 'even gross imperfection of motives should not be treated as the implacable enemy of at least some good outcomes' (Windsor, 2001; 41). Rather than driving change, the discussion of PRME in this article demonstrates that its



impact is significantly dependent upon its utilisation and interpretation by different faculty actors.

In this respect the key impact of PRME identified here has been its potential role as a conduit for change. This potential however, is often dependent upon the agency of individuals to develop strategic processes through which they can utilise this facility. Reiterating Matten and Moon's (2004) identification of the important role of 'individual faculty with a research interest or otherwise in CSR' in pushing forward responsible management agendas, this study has similarly highlighted the significance of such faculty in utilising PRME signatory status to initiate specific organisational changes, rather than expecting PRME to be a catalyst for broader change. To more effectively understand this process requires moving attention away from a pedagogical focus centred upon course content and curriculum development, and more towards understanding the role of key actors actively seeking to instigate organisational change (See Solitander et. al., 2012)

By focusing upon this dimension, we argue, analysis of PRME will be able to go beyond structural critiques of the weaknesses of soft regulatory schemes and develop a stronger, more nuanced understanding of the ways in which the inbuilt vagaries of such regulation allow individuals a level of agency to define and utilise these initiatives for organisational change. Kirton and Trebilock (2004) identify this as a key aspect of soft governance, as regulations and norms are open to interpretation and adjustment by those being regulated. This can undoubtedly have both positive and negative connotations for

the direction in which responsible management progresses. While it is beyond the parameters of this article and the empirical material contained within, to go into significant depth regarding these issues, we will signpost some potential avenues through which this form of analysis may fruitfully develop.

Interesting perspectives in this field can potentially be gained from within the organisational change literature. For example, Meyerson and Scully's (1995) analysis of the role of 'tempered radicals' in creating organisational change may provide an interesting avenue for closer examination of how faculty members use PRME to present change that is at odds with the dominant organizational culture within a framework which doesn't imply 'radical' change. Similarly, Kellogg's (2009) analysis of institutional change and relational spaces may provide significant insight into how the frameworks and opportunities offered through PRME enable reformers to develop a 'cross position collective for change' (Kellogg 2009; 657). The importance of agency is also highlighted in Thompson and Purdy's analysis of creating successful curricular innovations. Approaching from a different perspective, our analysis highlights how faculty utilise PRME as a basis for discussion regarding responsible management within schools. Such processes might be explored through Springett's (2003) conceptualisation of 'incitement to discourse' whereby actors utilise mainstream processes to instigate more radical organisational change.

The five short case studies outlined in this article clearly highlight the potential for further analysis along such themes. What is evident, however, is that the structural

framework of PRME is not enough in itself to create significant change towards responsible management education. Of key importance are the action repertoires and tactics of faculty members championing this agenda and their ability to utilise PRME to support these processes. While little research has so far been conducted regarding the role of faculty in shaping PRME implementation, two studies in a 2012 special edition of the *Journal of Management Education* appear to point the way, highlighting similar patterns to those identified here. Maloni, Smith and Napshin's (2012) quantitative study highlights the role of sustainability champions and committed faculty noting, quite alarmingly, that 'a lack of widespread faculty acceptance does not necessarily preclude a successful PRME implementation' (p.329). Solitander et. al. (2012) similarly utilise organisational learning frameworks to highlight the role of 'champions' in identifying strategies to overcome organisational barriers to successful implementation. In their words they 'creatively "make do" within the constraints imposed by their organisational context' (p. 338).

## **Conclusion**

This article has examined the extent to which UK business schools are adapting to a changing environment in which issues of responsible management education are increasingly coming to the fore. Overall, we present a mixed picture of change within the UK. The survey data highlighted increases in optional modules on ethics, sustainability and corporate responsibility, at both postgraduate and undergraduate levels. However, the limited provision of core modules meant that at two thirds of the

institutions surveyed, a student could still undertake a full programme of study and not receive any detailed responsible management teaching. The implication of this is that responsible management issues, while becoming increasingly recognised, are still perceived to be ‘optional extras’ rather than core issues.

Our research has not been able to identify significant evidence that PRME itself - or becoming a signatory to PRME – has proved to be the catalyst for change within many institutions. Instead, PRME appears to play a more enabling and substantiating role; serving as a positive reinforcement of responsible management within signatory schools. Evidence from five case study signatory schools demonstrated how it has been utilised in various ways to legitimate and encourage processes that were already ongoing and to give greater substance to calls for further change.

Indeed, the impact of PRME membership has been strongly dependent upon the manner in which active members of staff utilise their school’s signatory status to push for change. Thus, the impact of PRME may be far more complex to evaluate than in simple terms of direct curriculum change. This is partially because the reach of the PRME commitments stretch beyond issues of teaching and curricula. Therefore, to develop a clearer picture of the potential of PRME to shape significant change, one must look beyond merely a quantitative evaluation of modules and programmes, towards a more detailed assessment of the manner in which business schools, and in particular active faculty members, are engaging with the six principles.

There are strong similarities between the experiences of PRME and those of the GC. Both processes have been successful in getting organisations to engage with the responsible management debate and to commit to a set of core principles. However, this success has in part been because these commitments are relatively unchallenging, imprecise and that the scope for organisations to engage on their own terms is high. As a consequence, many critics suggest these processes have done little to push organisations beyond 'business as usual'.

In this context, similar challenges face both businesses and business schools in the area of responsible management. While the definition of social responsibility remains open to interpretation, both sets of organisations are confronted with the task of deciding what the concept means to them and how to engage in the debate. While for some, this may mean a significant re-evaluation of what they do and how they do it, for others it may result in seeking merely to conform to a 'lowest common denominator' approach which fulfils a basic commitment to addressing such concerns. Without doubt a key factor in shaping the positioning of an organisation along these dimensions is the ability of active faculty members to utilise enablers such as PRME and GC to exercise agency for change.

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**Table 1: Responsible management modules provided within the UK**

Note: Absolute number of institutions given in brackets

	Year	Undergraduate	Postgraduate	Any Level
Proportion of institutions offering only optional Responsible management modules	2006/7	45% (46)	32% (34)	51% (54)
	2009/10	43% (44)	35% (37)	36% (39)
Proportion of institutions offering compulsory responsible management modules <sup>1</sup>	2006/7	21% (21)	15% (16)	31% (33)
	2009/10	33% (34)	35% (37)	51% (55)
Proportion of institutions offering optional and/or compulsory responsible management modules	2006/7	66% (67)	48% (50)	83% (87)
	2009/10	76% (78)	69% (74)	87% (94)

**Table 2: Responsible Management provision within PRME and non PRME signatory institutions**

	Year	Undergraduate		Postgraduate		Any Level	
		Non Sigs.	Sigs.	Non Sigs.	Sigs.	Non Sigs.	Sigs.
Proportion of institutions offering only optional RM modules	2006/7	45% (38)	44% (8)	31% (26)	40% (8)	54% (46)	40% (8)
	2009/10	41% (34)	50% or 50% <sup>2</sup> (9)	32% (27)	46% or 50% (10)	36% (31)	36% or 35% (7)
Proportion of institutions offering compulsory RM modules	2006/7	20% (17)	22% (4)	12% (10)	30% (6)	28% (24)	45% (9)
	2009/10	34% (28)	30% or 28% (5)	35% (30)	32% or 30% (6)	51% (44)	50% or 50% (10)

<sup>1</sup> Institutions with compulsory RM modules may also provide optional modules.

<sup>2</sup> Figures in brackets are results without the two PRME signatories not included in the 2006/7 survey for a better comparison of change between the two surveys.

Proportion of institutions offering optional and/or compulsory RM modules	2006/7	66% (45)	67% (12)	42% (36)	70% (14)	82% (70)	85% (17)
	2009/10	75% (62)	80% or 78% (14)	67% (57)	77% or 80% (16)	87% (75)	86% or 85% (17)

**Table 3. Summary of developments in Responsible Management Provision within Five UK Business Schools.**

Institution	Key Areas of Change
Business school 1	Complete review of teaching programmes conducted in Autumn 2008. At undergraduate level, changes for 2010/11 year included a new core first year responsible management module, with responsible management issues added to the areas investigated in the placement year. At postgraduate level a reporting mechanism has been created for programme leaders to provide accounts of how responsible management issues have been integrated and a new <i>MSc in Social Responsibility and Sustainability</i> has been developed for 2011/12.
Business school 2	Building upon the existing pre-PRME flagship postgraduate programme <i>MSc in Sustainability and Management</i> and the now re-launched Centre for Research In Sustainability (CRIS). Developed a core responsible management first year subject and planning for a sustainability stream at this level of study for 2011/12 academic year. A new sustainability stream is due to start on the MBA in 2010/11 and an audit has been conducted to highlight responsible management teaching ‘gaps’ across the curriculum.
Business school 3	Restructuring of first year undergraduate modules to incorporate more teaching of responsible management themes. Core third year undergraduate module in Corporate Social Responsibility. Detailed ‘staff participatory’ study of responsible management provision conducted within the business school, including an audit of existing programmes to identify current mainstreamed responsible management teaching and recommendations for future changes.
Business school 4	Responsible Management education a core theme within the newly structured management school from 2008, pre-dating the commitment to PRME in mid-2009. Responsible management themes introduced within first and second year undergraduate introductory modules. Created a new <i>MSc Energy Management</i> . Core module on responsible management introduced for MBA and MSc programmes in 2010/11. Subsequent review of undergraduate curriculum to be undertaken with a focus upon the responsible management agenda.

Business school 5	Complete overhaul of undergraduate and masters programmes modelled on the principles of the PRME initiative with new bespoke modules created. There is extensive change planned for the MBA based on PRME principles and intended new postgraduate programmes in the area such as an MSc in Sustainable Development.
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